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THE SCRIPTURE IDEA
OF HERESY.

A SERMON,
PREACHED IN THE COUNTRY.

BY A MINISTER
OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

L O N D O N:

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A

S E R M O N.

ACTS xxiv. 14, 15, 16.

But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call Heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things, which are written in the law and in the prophets; and have hope towards God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just, and unjust; and herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence, toward God, and toward men.

IT was the fate of christianity itself, at its first promulgation, to be branded with the name of heresy; and its preacher, St. Paul, was called the great heresiarch, “a ringleader of the heresy of the Nazarenes,” for so the term should be translated in the 5th, as in the 14th verse of this chapter.

The word *Heresy*, in the original, is in itself a term of no criminal import. It means no more than a *choice*: as when different religious opinions are proposed to the mind, it “*chuses*” and embraces those, which appear most true and convincing. According to this interpretation, there can be nothing wrong, or criminal in heresy; it being nothing more, than the exercise of the mind upon subjects which deserve most to employ it. Nor do we find, that it had an ill name given to it, in scripture, but when accompanied with vice, and when opinions were maintained, more for the purpose of justifying wickedness, than the support of truth.

The Pharisees, among the Jews, were a religious sect, or heresy; and though many individuals of this profession were justly branded by our Lord, with the title of “*hypocrites*,” though they held the tradition of the elders, and rejected the commandments of God, yet notwithstanding, we find an example of a virtuous character declaring himself a member of this suspicious community; and informing us, that after the straitest sect (heresy) of the jewish religion he lived a Pharisee. (Acts xxvi. 5.) The Sadduces formed another sect, whose general tenor of practice and conversation, was nearly as reprehensible as that
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of the former. These heretics are frequently classed together; and the disciples of Christ are warned against the doctrine of both. But we may remark, that although the particular opinions of the Sadduces were of the most dangerous nature, and such as struck at the root of all religion, by denying the resurrection of the dead; yet our saviour, in his reasoning with them upon this subject, only told them that they were mistaken, and that "they erred, not knowing," that is, "not understanding the scriptures, nor the power of God." He "dencounces no woe" against them, as he frequently did against the Pharisees, for their hypocrisy; but "reasons" with them out of the scriptures, and proves to them, the truth of what they before had denied. This instance of lenity, must have proceeded from a distinction which our Lord made, between a mistake about the sense and meaning of certain passages of scripture, and a breach of the plain and positive commands of God, where there could be no mistake at all. And the treatment these heretics met with from our Lord, may serve as a lesson to bigots and persecutors. No hard names, nor ill language were given them. They were not threatened with fines, confiscations and imprisonment, to make them retract their errors; but much likelier means were made use of; reason

and argument; gentleness, and good-nature. They were treated as men under a mistake, whose errors might be involuntary; and the issues perhaps, only of unfortunate inquiry. They might deserve compassion, but not ill-usage; for where there is no crime, there certainly ought to be no punishment.

In all other places of scripture where heresy is spoken of with disgrace, it is always on account of the evil practices, and not the opinions, of those who were charged with it; in the epistle to the Galatians, (v. 20.) it is reckoned amongst the works of the flesh, “ seditions, heresies (*a*), envyings, murders, drunkenness and such like, and they which *do* such things, are told, “ that they shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” They were excluded from the kingdom of God, for the bad *actions* which they *did*, not the wrong opinions they maintained. St. Peter (1 Ep. ii. 1.) foretells, “ that false teachers would come, who would bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.” That they were not only

(*a*) In this place it is possible the word may mean *parties in the state*, or, *in temporal matters*; as it is joined with *seditions, or dissentions*. τας πολιτευματικας μελαθρεσθαι απος την Ρωμαιων ΑΙΡΕΣΙΝ.. Polyb. apud Raphel. Gal. i. 6.

only apostates, but such as were sunk in the grossest vices, is plain from the description given of them, in this chapter. The apostle says, that many shall follow their *pernicious ways*, or lewd practices (*b*) ; and that God will punish *them* for their wicked deeds, in the same remarkable manner, as he had done the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

St. Paul, directs Titus (iii. 10.) “to reject a man, that is an heretick, after the first and second admonition :” and subjoins as a reason, for this proceeding, “Knowing that he that is such, is subverted, and sinneth; being condemned of himself.” This is the character of an immoral member of the christian society, who, by being conscious of his having departed from the rules of it, must himself, approve of the sentence passed upon him; it has plainly this meaning and no other. For the apostle, in the verses before, had been recommending an exemplary behaviour in believers; that they, should be careful to excell all others (*c*) in good works; as such a conduct, would be

(*b*) Or *filthiness*; for many ancient copies, the King’s MS. and that in Mag. Coll. Oxford read *ασελγειας*. Vide Hammond.

(*c*) καλων εργων προισθαι, præesse to be at the head of good works, προιστασθαι των πρωτηστων—της πρεμονας. Demosth.

useful and serviceable, but that foolish questions, and contentions, were unprofitable and vain ; and that the heretic, whom he was to reject, was one, who was subverted, was turned out of the way (*d*), wherein he should have walked, and had sinned, and so become a disgrace to their society, and ought to be expelled from it.

Thus it appears, that heresy, according to the scripture notion, being not a pure mistake of judgment, but an embracing of doctrine known to be false by those who espouse it, out of disgust, pride, or envy, or from worldly principles, or to avoid persecution, or trouble in the flesh, may well be ranked among carnal lusts. Hence, are such men said, “ not to serve Jesus Christ, but their belly, (Rom. xvi. 18.) to teach what they ought not, for filthy lucre’s sake (Tit. i. 11.) to account gain for godliness, (1 Tim. vi. 5.) and through covetousness, with feigned words, to make merchandize of others.” (2 Pet. ii. 3.) And therefore the apostle doth not advise us, to convince, but only to admonish, and reject the heretic, as knowing that he sins, being convinced of his own conscience (*e*). And, where heresy is not taken up, to serve bad purposes, and bad passions, and is not

(*d*) Εξεπαντλια

(*e*) See Whitby, on Gal. v. 19. quoted Jebb’s Works, ii. 148.

not persisted in from a spirit of pride, strife, and contention, but from a laudable opposition to gross errors, and bad practices: there it is spoken of with commendation in the holy scriptures. St. Paul, hearing of some divisions in the church, of Corinth, about the celebration of the Lord's supper, writes to them, to prevent the irregularities of behaviour which had taken place there; and tells them, that those, who had a proper sense of their duty, and that sacred ordinance, should withdraw themselves from such as had not: that by thus forming themselves into a select and separate body, they might observe such order and decency, as would be rendered conspicuous to all the rest: that singularity in a good cause was a virtue, and that they ought to be proud of a distinction, when any good might be gained by it. "For there *must* be even *heresies*" says he, "amongst you, that they, which are approved," that is, men of approved virtue, and who will stand the test, "may be made manifest among you." And that this never could be done, but by forming a separation, and opposing good example to bad, in order to put a stop to the abuses complained of. Here the heretics, were the best part of the congregation: not the leading party, who had behaved amiss; from whom the conscientious were ordered to divide and separate, that they might manifest their integrity.

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Having examined the word “ heresy,” and seen in what sense it is used in scripture, we are not to wonder, that St. Paul, was not at all startled at being charged with it. They had not yet began to fulminate anathemas against those, who dared to think for themselves, nor were the terrors of an inquisition held out to such obstinate offenders. This intolerance was reserved for a later age. So long as our apostle knew that the Jews could prove nothing criminal against him, and his conscience told him, that he had been guilty of no offence, either against God or man, he held in contempt their accusation, of being a ringleader of the heresy of the Nazarenes ; and with a spirit and courage, that truth and innocence inspires, openly declared to the Roman governors, that if to be a christian was an heretic, a heretic, certainly he was ; but adds, that his accusers, were not aware, that by making him one, they had in a great measure included themselves, under the same predicament. “ For, says he, after the way which they call *heresy*, so worship I the God of my fathers.” No new object of worship is introduced ; the same common parent of mankind ; the same almighty *Being*, to whom our nation, owes such distinguished marks of favor and protection. He is equally the God of *christians* and of jews ; and all that he requires of either is, “ that they should worship him, in

in spirit, and in truth." Whatsoever, is written in the law, and the prophets, is equally the object of the faith of both ; and the expectation, which the jews indulge, of a resurrection of the dead, and a future recompence of reward ; the same hope, is the basis of a christian's creed, and the *distinguishing* article of his religion ; that in this latter instance, the difference did not respect the object but the degree of faith : for what the one only hoped for, as relying upon the goodness of God, the other, was fully assured of, by his having raised up Christ from the dead.

This was St. Paul's confession of faith, which he made before the Roman governors, upon a charge of heresy brought against him by the jews. It was thought a full and satisfactory defence by the civil power, and ought to have silenced his accusers, if piety, worth, and virtue could have expiated the offence of differing from them in opinion. It is a short formulary of faith, which the apostle has given us ; it consists of but few articles, and those, very plain and intelligible ; no one, who maintains the doctrines contained in it, ought to be charged with heresy, according to the modern acceptation of the term ; and if he is, he may shelter himself under the name and authority of St. Paul, who very frankly confessed, that what

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his enemies styled heretical, he considered as the true religion. And what this is, it is well worth our remarking. First, christianity has made no alteration, in the object of divine worship. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, is *one* Lord," is a truth equally insisted on by the christian as well as jewish lawgiver. Our saviour, in answer to the scribe, says, that the *first* of all the commandments, was that which related to the *unity* of the supreme Being; and as this was one of the first precepts of the moral law, his declaration concerning it, confirms and ratifies the truth of it; for he came not, he said, to relax their duty in this respect, but to strengthen, and give weight to their former obligations. It is on this foundation, that the apostle Paul, builds the faith of a christian: "To us, says he, there is but *one* God, the *Father*," whom, in another place, he styles, "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the *Father* of glory." The unity, and supremacy of God, is a truth of that magnitude and importance, that the whole jewish dispensation, was purposely framed to establish it. To imagine, that another dispensation, or what indeed was only an extension of the former, should unsettle, or undo, what was the original and grand design of it, is to ascribe weakness, and uncertainty to him, "with whom is no variableness nor shadow of turning." This is a truth, which

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falls in with our first, and natural conceptions of things : is what reason loudly proclaims, from the apparent unity of design throughout all the works of God ; and is an idea, which never can be wholly shut out of the mind, 'till it has been debauched by metaphysical jargon, and the refinements of false philosophy. Predicting the errors of an apostate church, the prophet Daniel (*f*) informs us that a heathen potentate (the Roman emperor) should forsake the objects of his father's worship ; should adopt *a strange God*,—expressly distinguished from the God of Gods,—a God unknown to his heathen ancestors,—though as far as related to divine adoration, equally an idol with what they had before worshiped ; and honour him, not in spirit and in truth, but with gold and with silver and with precious stones, and pleasant things. This is adding to, or substituting another deity instead of, that God who made heaven and earth, the God of Jesus and of Paul, whom alone men ought to worship, and expressly contradicts the command of both covenants.

The next truth of importance we learn from St. Paul's defence, is a belief in the holy scriptures,
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(*f*) Dan. xi. 36---38. See Commentaries and Essays published by the Society for promoting the knowledge of the scriptures. Vol. i. p. 486.

and that fundamental article, which is there found, a resurrection of the dead ; it is to this, that the law and the prophets evidently point, viz. to the coming of the Messiah, and the doctrine he should deliver. And what is it, that he principally teaches us ? Why, that he has brought life and immortality to light, through the gospel. It was this truth, that the apostle principally urges in his discourses. He says “ that he was commanded to preach unto the people, and to testify, that Christ was ordained of God, to be the judge of quick and dead ; to whom gave all the prophets witness, that through his name, whosoever believeth in him, shall receive the remission of sins.” And in another place, “ if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart, that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” In expectation of this great event, and preparatory to it, we are taught in the gospel, “ to deny ungodliness, and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present world, looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God, and our saviour Jesus Christ.”

To conclude : a belief in one God ;—in the truth of the holy scriptures ;—and in a judgment to come, is the substance of a christian creed. To fabricate
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any other doctrines, and make them of equal importance with these, is to lessen the authority, and sufficiency of the scriptures ; and to require belief to these supplementary doctrines, whether it is done by the mandate of the pope, or any other person, is to exercise a power, which no one has a right to, and which a protestant would disown, and resist, referring the decision of the dispute to a higher authority, to the bible, as his only rule of Faith, and if branded as a heretic for so doing, he would not deny the charge, but boldly confess, “ that after the way which they called heresy, so worshiped he the God of his fathers, believing all things, which are written in the holy scriptures ; and that he had hope towards God, that there would be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just, and the unjust.” And if this confession of faith did not satisfy his accusers, it would himself, provided he “ always exercised himself, to have a conscience void of offence, towards God, and towards men.”

To the King, eternal, immortal, invisible, God
only wise ; be ascribed all honour, power,
might, majesty, and dominion, hence-
forth and for ever.



